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The creation and features of the online archive
devoted to Sigurður Guðmundsson, the Painter,
and the “Evening Society”

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HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

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“Inventing Culture: Defining Sources of Theory and Inspiration and the Long-term Results of Culture Creation by Icelandic Intellectuals 1857–1874” (henceforth “Inventing Culture”) is an interdisciplinary project which brought together specialists from a variety of fields, including folkloristics, literature, theatre and museum studies, history and design. Carried out between 2011 and 2014, it resulted in the creation of an extensive archive that maps out the intellectual history and the widespread cultural influence of the “Evening Society” (Kveldfélagið) and one of its founding members, the artist and designer Sigurður Guðmundsson (1833–1874). The project, led by Terry Gunnell (University of Iceland) and Karl Aspelund (University of Rhode Island and University of Iceland), supported by the Icelandic Research Fund (Rannís), was a unique collaboration between Icelandic scholars at home and abroad and key Icelandic archive institutions: the National and University Library of Iceland (*Landsbókasafn Íslands – Háskólabókasafn*), the National Museum (*Þjóðminjasafn Íslands*), the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies (*Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum*), and the National Archive of Iceland (*Þjóðskjalasafn Íslands*).

The aim of this paper is to present the features and functionality of the digital archive produced by the project. Apart from being a useful research tool for scholars and an educational “sandbox” for students, the archive has provided a deeper understanding of “cultural planning” (Even-Zohar, 2008) while its format has brought to light networks, associations and friendships which determined the ultimate effectiveness of the Evening Society’s culture-shaping initiatives. Furthermore, the research conducted by the project investigators has underscored one of its assumptions about how important the international context of romantic nationalism was for the development of Icelandic culture at this time. Additionally, the timeline which is an integral part of the archive, places it firmly within that context. Finally, the paper also discusses the theoretical and practical considerations that pertain to a large digital humanities project of this kind.

“To collect all things, and images”

Among the countless manuscripts in the National Museum’s collection of Sigurður Guðmundsson’s papers, there is a relatively short “to do list” composed around 1862 (Sigurður Guðmundsson, 1862). At that time Sigurður was not quite 30 and it was the second year of the activity of the Evening Society (1861–1874). At first glance, given his interests and education, the list does not strike one as anything unusual. He plans to draw a map and images of Þingvellir with detailed topographical descriptions; compare it with other sites of this type; write essays on Icelandic art; compose chapters with illustrations introducing each century of Icelandic history; and make sketches of the national costume and write about it. In the same spirit, however, other, arguably more grandiose, plans are jotted down: to raise a memorial to Ingólfur

Árnason;¹ “beautify” Reykjavík, set up a national museum, a national theatre and a national “entertainment venue”; collect all national artefacts, objects and images pertaining to the history of Iceland, and more. Within less than 500 words, “collect” and “collection” appear eight times with a determined emphasis on “all”. Sigurður’s list is mentioned here for at least three reasons: 1) it gives a fairly good, if rather eclectic, overview of his initiatives many of which eventually became a reality thus marking the lasting impact he has had upon the creation of culture in Iceland; 2) it demonstrates the all-encompassing, interdisciplinary scope of this cultural undertaking discussed incessantly over the years among the group of Icelandic intellectuals associated with Sigurður and the Evening Society; and 3) in comparison to Sigurður Guðmundsson’s plans, the scope and objectives of any archival project such as that undertaken here appear somewhat humble.

“Inventing Culture” was conceived as a project which aimed to collect as much available material as possible relating to the work of Sigurður Guðmundsson and his colleagues over the space of a very active 17 years in the cultural history of Iceland, spanning the period from the publication of a polemical article on a traditional dress (Sigurður Guðmundsson, 1857) to his death in 1874. The project builds on earlier studies of the subject (see esp. Lárus Sigurbjörnsson, 1954; Arndís S. Árnadóttir, 2003; Sveinn Einarsson, 2007; Aspelund, 2011a, 2011b; Gunnell, 2008, 2012) as well as archival work conducted at the National Museum (Inga Lára Baldvinsdóttir, 1980–1981). Crucially, however, by bringing together transcripts of the (mostly unpublished) manuscripts in an easily searchable format, the digital collection facilitates a close reading of the sources of the group’s culture-shaping ideas, mapping their inspirations and development within the timeframe of the four decades of Sigurður’s life. By placing the archive within a wider network of international online resources providing contextual information, the project makes possible a systematic investigation of the influence that philosophical and political ideas reaching Iceland had on the country’s culture during the period in question (including female emancipation, nationalistic thought, and the need for increased literacy and democracy). As a result, a more comprehensive picture of the thinking and aspirations of the Icelandic nationalist intelligentsia of the time has emerged through analysis and classification of the material that has been assembled by the project’s investigators and researchers (including a group of BA and MA students) over the period of four years. Naturally, as will be discussed subsequently, given the format of the archive, room has been provided for envisaged further extensions and future collaborations.

The project commenced in early 2011 and comprised two main strands: 1) scholarly/educational focusing on the collection, classification and analysis of the manuscripts and other relevant material, 2) archival, which was to lead to the creation of an online repository of transcripts and images. As noted, the interdisciplinary of Sigurður Guðmundsson’s activities and interests required an involvement of scholars from a variety of fields. The principle investigators were Terry Gunnell, Karl Aspelund, Sigurjón B. Hafsteinsson (University of Iceland), Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson (University of Iceland) and Sveinn Einarsson (independent scholar). The project also had academic contributions from Arndís Árnadóttir, Guðmundur Hálfðanarson and Ólafur J. Engilbertsson who took part in two conferences relating to the project which were held at the National Museum in 2012 and 2013. The group of transcribers and researchers included Edda Björnsdóttir, Eiríkur Valdimarsson, Elsa Ósk Alfreðsdóttir, Heiða Björk Árnadóttir, Jófríður Benediktsdóttir, María Kristjánsdóttir, Svavar Steinarr Guðmundsson and the present author who was in charge of the

¹ This was followed by a discussion in the Evening Society on Jan. 30, 1863 (Kvöldfélagið, 1861–1865; see also Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, 2011).

creation of the archive. It should be stressed, that the work on the transcripts led to new research projects. Preliminary findings were presented at the two conferences mentioned above with papers covering a variety of topics ranging from a close analysis of the minutes recording Evening Society meetings; the creation of the national costume; the development of national theatre; the collection of Icelandic folktales by Jón Árnason (who was also a member of the Evening Society and Sigurður's collaborator in establishing the National Museum); and the role of women in and around the Evening Society, to discussions of nationality in Iceland and Denmark, and the work of the Society seen within the context of the major intellectual and artistic streams of the nineteenth century. Extended versions of these papers will become chapters in a forthcoming book also relating to the project.

One of the first stages of "Inventing Culture" was the launch of a simple WordPress website containing information about the project, a bibliography of published works on the subject, and links, as well as an easy-access online library designed for the project's participants, containing an extensive collection of other relevant material. Given the amount of digitisation that was to be undertaken, choosing the right software for the main archive was a more complex decision. A customised system had obvious advantages but its development would have been both costly and time-consuming. Accordingly, the current version of the archive uses MediaWiki, a free open source software, which made it possible to add a substantial amount of material immediately during the first year of the project. The site is at present hosted by the University of Iceland (sigurdurmali.hi.is), but plans exist for it to be moved eventually to the National Library.

The MediaWiki software, originally created for Wikipedia but used for a number of electronic archives (see e.g. Transcribe Bentham), seemed customizable enough for the requirements of the project but, most importantly, it offered a familiar interface. The latter ensures that all the users and potential content-editors can not only easily navigate through entries but also add their own material and comments. The main structure of the archive, including a list of the main section as well as customized templates, had been completed by the spring of 2011. Over the duration of the project, scanned images and transcripts were gradually added to the archive, linked and annotated.

The Scope of the Project

The "Inventing Culture" core collection focuses on the transcripts of the minutes of the Evening Society (1861–1874) and the papers of Sigurður Guðmundsson, including his note books with added descriptions of his sketches, the study of which shows the way some of the visual ideas were developed over the years (Jófríður Benediktsdóttir, 2014). The minutes, digitized by the National Library, record 13 years of the Society's meetings, and comprise 276 entries and 582 pages. They chart not only the vicissitudes of what was essentially a debating club but also the gradual radical development of their ideas (Aspelund & Eiríkur Guðmundsson, 2012). The majority of the transcribed letters in the archive come from the National Museum (which holds 233 letters to and from Sigurður Guðmundsson). This collection was complemented with other letters from the National Library and the National Archives, the latter holding a vast amount of letters between various members of the Evening Society and Jón Sigurðsson (1811–1879). As noted above, Sigurður Guðmundsson was the central figure around which most of the material (especially the letters) revolved, although his immediate circle of friends and "Evening Society" collaborators were also prominent (including figures from abroad such as Guðbrandur Vígfússon, George Webbe Dasent and Carl Emil Wessel). As research on the project continued, it nonetheless

became clear that the “immediate” circle was not as compact as had originally been thought. While the rules of the Evening Society were initially signed by its 16 founding member members, the names of over 130 Icelanders came to be mentioned as members throughout the 13 years of the Society’s activity (cf. Hrefna Róbertsdóttir, 1990). Currently, the archive contains biographical information on the members of the Evening Society, who signed the rules during the first and the second meetings, but plans are for this to be extended. Other sections of the archive include an extensive selection of Sigurður Guðmundsson’s essays and drafts of his speeches, galleries of his portraits, other drawings and sketches combed from the letters and various informal writings, an unpublished “play” which involves the figure of Sigurður, and a selection of the folktales which were Sigurður’s contribution to Jón Árnason’s *Íslenskar þjóðsögur og æfintýri* (1862–1864). In order to facilitate the search for the relevant material, digital versions of the earlier published resources are either added to the archive (e.g. Páll Briem, 1889) or summarized and linked (e.g. Halldór J. Jónsson, 1978, 1985; Matthías Þórðarson, 1929).

The Structure of the Entries

Since the archive is based on MediaWiki, it primarily comprises entries grouped by categories. Each entry has a very basic structure, displaying the transcript and a corresponding low resolution image of the manuscript which is linked to the original archives (the National Museum and National Library) where high resolution versions are available online (through handrit.is and sarpur.is) while in the case of materials from the National Archives, we were allowed to place high resolution images directly on the archive. The transcripts preserve the lineation of the original texts, deletions, additions, and comments on illegible words, as well as markings in the margins. In due time, the aim is for each transcript to be annotated. In addition to the above, the entries also include information on the source collections, summaries, keywords and lists of names mentioned in the text. These are linked to other materials within the archive. Wherever possible, the naming system of the original collection was retained to ensure consistency and an easy identification of all the items. The archive is organized using categories, a software feature of MediaWiki that provides automatic indexes, and additionally serves as a table of contents. In this way, for instance, even though the names of the letters appearing in the main table of contents do not contain the names of the sender or receiver, such details are provided in the sub-categories. Importantly, they also chart the chronology of individual letter exchanges and these are also placed within a timeline.

The timeline covering the period between 1840 and 1879 constitutes a logical (though originally unplanned) extension of the archive. This was devised mostly during the second year of the project, and was motivated by a wish to place the activity of Sigurður Guðmundsson and the Evening Society in both Icelandic and international contexts. The timeline thus contains lists of key events during a given year (with links to the news annually announced by the journal *Skímir*, and other newspapers available on the timarit.is website); important books published; famous paintings; lists of works performed in theatres in Denmark as well as a section related directly to the activities of the Society. In essence, this timeline fulfils one of the project’s key objectives, namely “to view the intellectual history of Icelandic romantic nationalism as part of other larger international intellectual movements that were helping to shape and already impacting on western industrial society at this time” (Gunnell & Aspelund, 2011).

Interlocking

Another of the main objectives of the project was to graft the Sigurður Guðmundsson archive into the network of existing digital resources at present available both in Iceland and abroad. Rather than existing as a self-contained module, the aim was for the archive to not only accumulate relevant material from various collections but also “link out” to external sites. Crucial to the project was the earlier-noted collaboration with four major Icelandic institutions: the National Library, the National Museum, the National Archives and the Árni Magnússon Institute of Icelandic Studies. All manuscripts in the “Inventing Culture” digital archive are thus linked to their original collections (as noted above). In addition, annotations, biographical entries and the timeline all have direct links to timarit.is (periodicals from Iceland the Faroe Islands and Greenland), baekur.is (old Icelandic books digitised), handrit.is (the Icelandic manuscripts catalogue with accompanying digital reproductions), sagnagrunnur.com (a database of published Icelandic folk legends), ÍSMUS (Icelandic Music and Cultural Heritage website), archive.org (The Internet Archive), hathitrust.org (Hathi Trust Digital Library) and other relevant resources. Material has also been acquired from the Royal Library in Copenhagen, and the Bodleian Library in Oxford (although for legal reasons not all of this can be shown on the website). Another related initiative which was, in many ways an inspiration for our archive, was SPIN – the Study Platform on Interlocking Nationalisms led by Joep Leersen, Professor of European Studies at the University of Amsterdam, a project which the main organisers of the Icelandic RANNÍS project were also directly involved in. The Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe (ERNiE, now available at www.romanticnationalism.net), coordinated by SPIN, contains a number of entries directly related to “Inventing Culture”. The knowledge gained during the project also contributed to the re-design of a website featuring the text of Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar and Njálssaga with an annotated list of articles (wikisaga.hi.is) and to the planned creation of an online archive devoted to Jón Árnason.

The Future

The “Inventing Culture” project is, by its very nature and intent open-ended. As Matthew G. Kirschenbaum has underlined, the idea of “finishing” a piece of digital work is always questionable, since “‘completeness’, in a medium where the prevailing wisdom is to celebrate the incomplete, the open-ended, and the extensible” (Kirschenbaum, 2009). While the project leaders explicitly acknowledged from the start the dangers associated with an almost indefinite process of revision and maintenance, they viewed this as being more of an opportunity than a threat. Specifically, now that the main goals stated in the project outline (Gunnell & Aspelund, 2011) have been fulfilled, and given that the scale of the archive has exceeded any initial expectations, they have also recognised the project’s large pedagogical potential, and the fact that it is bound to be on-going. The open-ended structure means that the online resources can be used to engage both scholars and students (at college and university level) in close reading and textual interpretation, building on their new media literacies. The aim is thus for further transcription to take place, for annotation to be added, and for more relevant material to be included, if it comes to light. There is little question that the archive allows students to gain in-depth experience and understanding of an intense key period in the cultural history of Iceland in which the seeds of modern Iceland were sown. Equally important is that the archive is an interactive research tool that allows those using it to decide their own focus of analysis, which can be an individual, a year, a theme, a cultural network, or

even a particular work of literature. Our hope is that in the long run, all of this will feed back into the archive in some way. All in all, the aim is for “Inventing Culture” to continue to be a live environment, providing tangible benefits well after the project’s original ‘completion’ date, just as the work of Sigurður Guðmundsson and the Kveldfélagið has been done.

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